Luther's Theology: The Will's Bondage - Place for Truth

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The Bondage of the Will is one of Martin Luther's most important and enduring works. It represents his greatest defense of the doctrine of predestination and was written as a response to Erasmus of Rotterdam. I have previously described the relationship between these two men and the circumstances that led them to write. I would now like to provide a brief introduction to *The Bondage of the Will* for those who wish to tackle this book. Luther tended to think in terms of dichotomies, so I will describe four such contrasts that are critical to his overall argument.

Creator vs. Creature

This seems to be the most fundamental dichotomy underlying all the others. "Your thoughts about God are all too human," Luther tells Erasmus. Luther's firm belief in this categorical distinction between the divine and the human translates into how he views the entire narrative of salvation history and the process of justification. "We are not disputing about nature but about grace, and we are not asking what we are on earth, but what we are in heaven before God." Luther will not allow God to be bound by any human formulation or analogy. "We know quite well that God does not love or hate as we do, since we are mutable in both our loving and hating, whereas he loves and hates in accord with his eternal and immutable nature, so that passing moods and feelings do not arise in him." Thus, *The Bondage of the Will* could also be titled "The Unbinding of God": we must not dictate to our Creator.

Hidden God vs. Revealed God

A closely related comparison is God as he exists eternally in his glory and as he is revealed in his Word. Luther had established this concept in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518. "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross." Luther applies this principle to those who attempt to pry into God's secret will regarding election, accusing Erasmus of relying on flawed

human reason while ignoring the principles laid out in scripture. “Here we do not search, but there, where he has forbidden us to search, we do nothing but search, with never-ending temerity, not to say blasphemy.” He concludes that “how it is just that he damns the undeserving is incomprehensible now, except only to faith, until the Son of Man shall be revealed.”

Flesh vs. Spirit

This is a key distinction concerning the nature of man. Luther rejects the idea that man stands in the middle and can choose between a good spirit or bad flesh, or that original sin has only partially hindered man’s ability to perform acts of righteousness. Instead, he looks to Christ’s words John 3:6 that what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. “We make a clear distinction between flesh and spirit as opposite realities, and we say with the oracles of God that a man who has not been born anew through faith is flesh. We then say that one who has been born anew is no longer flesh except as regards the remnants of the flesh that war against the firstfruits of the Spirit he has received.” Only by God’s sovereign election and the regeneration of the Spirit, says Luther, can we perform the works of righteousness.

Kingdom of God vs. Kingdom of Satan

In addition to viewing humans in terms of either flesh or spirit, Luther also divides them between two kingdoms. He writes that “there is no middle kingdom between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, which are mutually and perpetually in conflict with each other,” and that even the best deeds of those outside of Christ “are nonetheless in the sight of God truly flesh and subservient to the kingdom of Satan; that is to say, they are impious and sacrilegious and on all counts bad.” Therefore, Luther sees a differentiation between the redeemed and the damned both in terms of substance (flesh vs. spirit) and allegiance (God vs. Satan). However, Luther does not give credit to humans for meriting the Kingdom of God: “…before a man is changed into a new creature of the Kingdom of the Spirit, he does nothing and attempts nothing to prepare himself for this renewal and this Kingdom, and when he has been recreated he does nothing and attempts nothing toward remaining in this Kingdom, but the Spirit alone does both of these things in us, recreating us without us and preserving us without our help in our recreated state…”

There are other dichotomies in this book, such as the internal and external perspicuity of scripture, law and gospel, and what is “beneath” a man or “above”

him. However, these four key contrasts in *The Bondage of the Will* are the foundation upon which Luther builds his doctrine of predestination. As you read, keep an eye out for these principles.

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Rupp, E. Gordon and Philip S. Watson, editors. *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 125.

Ibid, 325.

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Ibid., 260.

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